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Officials Say Too Many Seek Access to Secrets

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WASHINGTON, June 3 — So many people are now asking for official clearance to handle "secret" and "top secret" materials, Government officials say, that it is impossible to investigate the applications adequately.

More than 200,000 people applied for clearance to handle classified information last year, 50 percent more than a decade ago. Federal officials say one reason for the growth in such requests is that the number of classified documents and related materials has grown dramatically in the last few years.

The spy case involving three members of the Walker family, who had all been cleared by the Navy for access to classified materials, has focused attention on security clearances. Many Federal officials are saying that clearance investigations must be improved.

The Defense Department, which handles 90 percent of the Government's security clearances, is supposed to re-investigate everyone cleared for access to top secret material every five years. But the department says it is so overwhelmed with new applications that the re-investigations are being conducted only once every 17 years, on the average.

Clearance Procedures Criticized

"I'm not impressed with the steps that have been taken to deal with the increase" in applications, said Senator Patrick J. Leahy, the Vermont Democrat who is vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

In recent Congressional testimony Bill W. Thurman, the General Accounting Office's deputy director for national security affairs, said the Government's security clearance program suffered from inconsistent and erratic investigative procedures, a lack of periodic re-investigations of most cleared personnel and failure to control the increasing number of clearance requests. The General Accounting Office is an investigative arm of Congress.

Britt L. Snider, the Defense Department's director of counterintelligence and security policy, said today, "We don't entirely disagree, the problem being our resources and the huge number of people applying for clearances."

Mr. Thurman criticized the Navy for failing to heed numerous recommendations from his and other agencies that it assign one office the job of deciding who should be cleared. Now the decisions are made by different people among the Navy's 3,000 commands around the world, he said.

Navy Resists Centralizing

Navy officials have said they prefer to leave the decisions to local commanders because they know their own people. But Mr. Snider said the Defense Department, too, has been urging the Navy to centralize the decisions, partly because some local commanders "may not be familiar enough with all the policies."

John A. Walker Jr. his brother and his son, who are charged with spying for the Soviet Union, had secret or top secret clearance while in the Navy. The two elder Walkers received their clearance many years ago. Some officials say the Walker case may be the most serious in recent times.

Among the 4.3 million people who have clearance to handle classified material, more than 1,000 are Soviet émigrés who are of special concern to the Federal Bureau of investigation, Edward J. O'Malley, head of the bureau's intelligence division, said today.

They work for military contractors "all over the country," Mr. O'Malley said. "We're not saying all these people are spies," Mr. O'Malley said. But he added, "We do know that the Soviet intelligence officers target these people." Most have relatives in the Soviet Union and might be coerced into cooperating with Soviet agents, he said.

'Limited Resources' Cited

The Defense Department had about 1,400 investigators to process the 206,790 applications for security clearance it received last year. Although the number of investigators has grown in recent years, "we still have fairly limited resources," Mr. Snider said.

"With all these applications, we now seem to be in the business of clearing people, not of finding potential security risks," said another Defense Department official who asked not to be identified, adding that the department was always under pressure to reduce the application backlog.

Last week Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia, the senior Democrat on the Permanent Investigations Subcommittee, which has been investigating security clearance procedures, said, "Numbers are overwhelming the whole system."

A Senate aide involved with investigations of clearance procedures said, "We're finding that in many of the recent espionage cases there are indicators that they may have been caught with a re-investigation."

Mr. Snider said the Defense Department was about to begin experimenting with lie detector tests for people "in

the most sensitive programs." But he acknowledged that under that program, "none of the Walkers would have had to be tested."

Nearly all of the 333,000 people with clearance for material classified "confidential" work in private industry. That is the lowest clearance, and the Government often allows the companies to issue those clearances.

For the more than 3.35 million people cleared for secret material, the Defense Department checks the files of the F.B.I., the Internal Revenue Service and other Federal agencies to see if any of them contain derogatory information.

More than 600,000 people have clearance for top secret material, and Mr. Snider said the department recently added a personal interview to those investigations. In addition to the checks of Government files, the department checks these applicants' credit records, foreign travels and other activities for the previous five years.

For the more than 100,000 people applying for access to "sensitive compartmented information," the most highly classified intelligence information, investigators check foreign travel and other activities for the preceding 15 years, and they interview friends and neighbors.

In general, Mr. Snider said, "We look for problems of a financial nature, for drinking or drug problems, for vulnerabilities that might allow someone to be compromised."

All of that, he acknowledged, "does not necessarily produce evidence of intent to commit espionage, and it doesn't identify people who join the Government and then for some reason change."